

Myra Pollack Sadker

(1943-1995)

Educator, researcher, author, professor. Nationally known advocate for education equity. Conducted ground breaking research on gender equity in education



Myra Pollack Sadker was born in Augusta, Maine in 1943. She graduated with a B.A. magna cum laude from Boston University in 1964, received a master's degree from Harvard University in 1965, and an Ed.D. in education from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1971. She taught in elementary, junior and senior high schools in Massachusetts and Thailand.

In 1973, she joined the faculty of American University in Washington, D.C. as professor of Education, later becoming the Dean of the School of Education until 1995.

Sadker was a pioneer in the study of gender bias in America's schools. She became a leading advocate for equal educational opportunities. Through her research, Sadker alerted Americans to the academic, physical, psychological, and career-related costs of sexism. She documented that gender bias in America's schools was prevalent at all levels, independent of geographical, social, or racial factors. From grade school through graduate school, from inner city to rural towns, Sadker discovered and exposed gender discrimination in textbooks, classrooms, teaching methods, and sports. Furthermore, she also found that there were subtle patterns of inequities that shaped the way teachers instructed students. She observed and documented that boys and girls, in the same classroom, received a very different instruction altogether. While boys dominated the classroom, receiving more frequent, active, direct and precise instruction, girls, regardless of racial or ethnic or class background, remained more passive, reinforced by a consistent lack of the same kind of attention. Girls, as a group were being consistently, cheated of attention, teaching quality and instruction time. The difference in teachers' techniques was due, Sadker realized, to the subconscious or conscious, and often unintentional gender bias of the educators. Sadker publicly reported that gender bias was deeply rooted in the school system around the U.S.

Sadker demonstrated that the gender bias that took place in the classroom conditioned both boys and girls for similar roles at home and in the workplace. Boys, being the center of attention in school, combined with other gender pressures from outside school, could misinterpret their future role as husbands and fathers, be more rigidly socialized to "male appropriate" behavior than girls, consequently engaging themselves in riskier actions, and be tracked into gender stereotyped careers. Girls, on the contrary, learned from elementary school to be quieter and more conforming, more likely to result in voiceless working women. Sadker authored and co-authored six books on sexism in the schools, teacher education, and children's literature. In 1973, Sadker wrote the first book for teachers on the issue of sexism, *Sexism in School and Society*. Other books are *Now Upon a Time: A Contemporary View of Children's Literature* (1977), *Teachers Make the Difference: An Introduction to Education* (1980), *Sex Equity Handbook for Schools* (1982), *Teachers, Schools and Society* (1988, 1991, 1994), and *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* (1994). Most of her books were co-authored with her husband, David Sadker. She also wrote numerous articles on how to raise and teach children free from the influence of sexism.

In addition to producing a specialized bibliography on the issue of educational equity, Sadker brought her cause to a more general audience. With her husband David, Sadker spoke in more than forty states and overseas, giving hundreds of presentations and workshops for teachers and parents concerned with sexist behaviors. She also spoke out on this issue on a variety of television shows ranging from Oprah Winfrey to Dateline, from the Today Show to National Public Radio's, All Things Considered.

As recognition of her long career devoted to research, teaching and advocacy for gender equality in education, Sadker received numerous awards. Her first award was the American Educational Research Association's Women's Educators' Award, granted in 1980 for research making the greatest contribution to women and education. Since that time, she received awards almost annually. Among the many honors, she received The American University College of Arts and Sciences Award as faculty member making the greatest contribution to research and professional development in 1982 and 1994. In 1982, the Women's Institute selected her as Outstanding Woman Faculty Member from American University. The following year, in 1983, Sadker received The American University Graduate Student Council Faculty Service Award for outstanding service to students. In 1986, she was granted the Andrew Mellon Senior Scholar Award for her outstanding scholarship, research, and professional contributions. In 1987, she received the distinguished achievement award, Excellence in Educational Journalism, from the Educational Press Association of America. In 1992, she was presented with the Review of Research Award, from the American Educational Research Association. In 1993, she was granted the Alice G. Sargent Memorial Award for research, leadership, and service, presented by the American Society for Training and Development. In 1994, Sadker received two significant awards: the 1994 Educational Achievement Award for research and writing on behalf of girls' education, presented by the National Coalition of Girls Schools, and the Eleanor Roosevelt Award of the American Association of University Women. In 1995, the year of her death, she received the Professional Service Award by the American Educational Research Association and an honorary doctorate from Pine Manor College in Massachusetts.

In commemoration of her work and achievements, family, friends, and followers established the "Annual Myra Sadker Day," celebrated at American University. Since March 5, 1998, the day which would have been Sadker's fifty-fifth birthday, Myra Sadker Advocates have remembered Sadker by creating a national rallying point to promote gender equity. That day, volunteers, independently or in groups, identify, plan, and implement at least one activity that increases gender equity and understanding. In addition, the Annual Myra Sadker Awards (Equity Award, Community Equity Award, Student Equity Award, and Curriculum Award) are granted to individuals and organizations whose work advances opportunities for girls and boys. Some of the recipients have been Anne L. Bryant, executive director of the American Association of University Women (1998), Judith Mann, prize-winning columnist for The Washington Post (1999), Connie Morella (2000), the National Women's History Project (2001), and the National Women's Law Center (2002).

When Sadker was diagnosed with breast cancer, she chose the most aggressive treatment. She died during a bone marrow transplant in 1995. She lived in Montgomery County since 1973 and both daughters, Robin, a physician, and Jacqueline, an attorney, went to school in the county.

SOURCES:

- www.sadker.org
- www.nwhp.org/about_nwhp/sadker_award/award01.html